

VEHICLE AND ENERGY PRODUCING AND STORAGE SYSTEM
FOR A VEHICLE

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

This application is a continuation-in-part of U.S. application Serial Number 10/248,953, filed March 5, 2003.

10 1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a vehicle and an energy producing and storage system for a vehicle having a compressed gaseous fuel tank, an electric storage battery, 15 and a fuel cell.

2. Disclosure Information

Vehicles such as hybrid electric vehicles having 20 fuel-burning engines and fuel cell vehicles, both powered by compressed fuel gas such as natural gas or hydrogen, typically utilize generally cylindrical fuel storage tanks. The cylindrical geometry of such tanks is dictated by the relatively high pressures necessary to store an adequate 25 amount of fuel. Needless to say, cylindrical tanks do not package well in automotive vehicles, notwithstanding that engineers have striven for years to achieve acceptable packaging coupled with acceptable vehicle range. The need for packaging an electrical storage battery within either a 30 hybrid electric vehicle or a fuel cell vehicle further compounds the problems faced by vehicle designers. Such batteries are typically not package-efficient and in fact, have frequently been of either a flat construction or square

sectional construction, neither of which is particularly conducive to packaging within the confines of an automotive vehicle.

The inventors of the present energy producing and storage system have solved many of the problems which plagued known battery and compressed gas storage systems by providing a nesting relationship between an electric storage battery and a generally cylindrical compressed gas storage tank. The geometry of the electric storage battery's case takes advantage of the geometry found in a conventional automotive vehicle at the forward point of the traditional luggage compartment, by conforming with the seat back bulkhead of the adjacent passenger compartment, and at the same time conforming with the cylindrical outer wall of the compressed gas storage tank.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

An energy producing and storage system for a vehicle includes a gas storage tank for compressed fuel gas, with the tank having a generally cylindrical outer wall and two arcuate ends, and a generally cylindrical storage battery having a concave surface extending along and nested with at least a portion of the generally cylindrical outer wall of the gas storage tank. The battery preferably further includes at least one additional surface extending parallel to a wall of a vehicular compartment into which the gas storage tank and the storage battery are installed.

The concave surface of the storage battery defines one portion of a generally triangular cross section of the storage battery. The other two portions of the generally triangular cross section are defined by the floor of the storage compartment into which the gas storage tank and

storage battery are installed and a segment of the battery's exterior surface which is generally planar and which is parallel to a seat back bulkhead defining an adjoining passenger compartment.

5 According to another aspect of the present invention, a storage battery has two generally quadrilateral ends abutting at least a portion of the arcuate ends of the gas storage tank. The generally quadrilateral ends include ports allowing the passage of cooling air into the storage
10 battery.

15 The compartment into which the storage battery and gas storage tank are installed preferably extends laterally across the width of the vehicle body. The storage battery preferably further includes a plurality of battery cell groups, with each group extending axially in a direction parallel to the generally cylindrical outer wall of the gas storage tank. In this manner, the storage battery and the gas storage tank may be tucked into close proximity of the rear seatback of the vehicle, so as to minimize the space
20 occupied by the storage battery and the gas storage tank.

 According to another aspect of the present invention, a storage battery further includes a thermal management system for selectively passing either cabin or ambient air through the storage battery.

25 According to another aspect of the present invention, a method for providing an energy storage system for a vehicle includes the steps of securing a storage battery within a fuel storage compartment immediately adjacent a passenger compartment of the vehicle, with the storage battery having a first exterior surface which is generally planar and which is parallel to a seatback bulkhead defining an adjoining passenger compartment, and a second exterior surface which is concave, with the first and
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second surfaces combining with the surface which is parallel to the floor of the fuel storage compartment to define a generally triangular cross section of the storage battery. The present method further includes securing a cylindrical compressed fuel gas tank in the fuel storage compartment, with at least a portion of the fuel tank being nested with the concave surface of the storage battery.

The present invention also provides a vehicle including an energy producing and storage system. The system includes first and second portions which cooperate in a nesting relationship, thereby minimizing vehicle space usage. A vehicle body includes a floor having a first concavity formed therein for receiving a third portion of the system from outside the vehicle. The first concavity is configured to prevent at least some of the third portion from extending beyond the vehicle body, and is configured to minimize use of the vehicle occupant space.

The invention further provides a vehicle having a uni-body construction and configured to efficiently package a fuel cell system. The vehicle includes a fuel cell system including a fuel cell stack, a fuel tank, and a storage device for storing and providing electricity. The fuel tank and the storage device cooperate in a nesting relationship to minimize vehicle space usage. A first concavity is formed in a floor of the uni-body, and is configured to receive the fuel cell stack from outside the vehicle.

The invention also provides a method for packaging an energy producing and storage system in a vehicle. The vehicle includes a vehicle body having a floor with a first concavity formed therein. The method includes placing first and second portions of the system together in a nesting relationship, thereby minimizing vehicle space usage. A third portion of the system is placed in the first concavity

from outside the vehicle such that at least some of the third portion does not extend beyond the vehicle body.

It is an advantage of the present invention that an energy producing and storage system according to this
5 invention will allow maximum energy density within the fuel storage space of a hybrid electrical vehicle or fuel cell vehicle. In other words, a maximum amount of electrical charge storage and compressed gas storage will be permitted by the inter-nesting relationship between the storage
10 battery and the gas storage tank.

It is a further advantage of the present invention that the present energy producing and storage system will utilize minimum space within a laterally confined energy storage compartment within a vehicle.

15 It is another advantage of the present invention that the ability to use ambient air for cooling the storage battery reduces the need for conditioned air drawn from the vehicle's passenger compartment. This in turn reduces the amount of energy drawn from the battery system to operate a
20 refrigeration system.

It is another advantage that the present system permits maximum bimodal energy storage within a minimum package volume.

25 Other advantages, as well as objects and features of the present invention, will become apparent to the reader of this specification.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

30 Figure 1 is a side view of a vehicle having a energy producing and storage system according to the present invention;

Figure 2 is a cut-away perspective view of an energy producing and storage system according to the present invention;

5 Figure 3 is a perspective view of a storage battery according to one aspect of the present invention;

Figure 4 is a front perspective view of the storage battery shown in Figure 3;

10 Figure 5 is a perspective view of a section through the battery of Figures 3 and 4 showing pluralities of battery cell groups within the storage battery;

Figure 6 is a top plan view of a portion of the vehicle shown in Figure 1;

Figure 7 is a sectional view taken through lines 7-7 in Figure 6, and including a vehicle seat;

15 Figure 8 is a bottom perspective view of a portion of the vehicle shown in Figure 6; and

Figure 9 is a perspective view of an alternative embodiment of a vehicle body in accordance with the present invention.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

As shown in Figure 1, vehicle 10 has an energy producing and storage system that includes a first portion, or compressed gas storage tank 12, mounted transversely across the substantial width of the vehicle, with the tank being located behind seat back 44 and rear seat strainer or bulkhead 42. Because gas storage tank 12 has a conventional circular cross section necessitated by the high pressures encountered with compressed fuel gases such as compressed natural gas or compressed hydrogen, gas storage tank 12 creates a packaging problem which is solved by the present invention.

With fuel cell or hydrogen internal combustion engine (ICE) hybrid electric vehicles, for example, the fuel storage problem posed by the awkward configuration of compressed gas tanks is further compounded by the need for a substantial electric storage battery. As noted above, traditional batteries typically have a flat configuration which is not particularly advantageous for a vehicle such as a passenger car. This problem is compounded because a good portion of the traditional trunk is pre-empted by gas storage tank 12. Accordingly, the inventors of the present invention propose a second portion of the energy producing and storage system, or a storage battery 22, having a generally triangular cross-section. The battery itself has a generally cylindrical case 26. As used term herein, the term "generally cylindrical" does not refer necessarily to a right circular cylinder, but rather to a more generic definition of cylinder as embraced in classic geometry. Figure 1 shows that storage battery 22 has a concave section in contact with gas storage tank 12. Thus, concave surface 30 extends along and is nested with at least a portion of the generally cylindrical outer wall 14 of gas storage tank 12. Gas storage tank 12 is mounted to floor 46 of vehicle 10. Similarly, storage battery 22 is mounted to floor 46. The floor contacting surface of storage battery 22 combines with concave surface 30 and slant surface 38 (Figure 5), which contacts rear seat strainer or bulkhead 42 (Figure 1), to define one portion of a generally triangular cross section of storage battery 22.

As shown in Figure 3, concave surface 30 of storage battery 22 is formed in one portion of storage battery 22. Storage battery 22 further has generally quadrilateral ends 20 which abut a portion of arcuate ends 18 of gas storage tank 12. Generally quadrilateral ends 20

house circulating blowers 74 shown in Figure 4. Blowers 74 move cooling air from air inlet 58 (Figure 3) to air outlets 62.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate snorkel tube 60, which
5 draws ambient air from an area of the vehicle extending
between rear fascia 16 (Figure 1) and the rearmost portion
of the vehicle body. Snorkel tube 60 conducts ambient air
into air inlet 58, to allow flow through the interior of
storage battery 22 and into air outlets 62, where air is
10 discharged through elbows 64 and into wheehouses 70 (Figure
1). As an alternative, snorkel tube 60 may have a branch
passing through rear seat strainer 42 and into passenger
compartment 24. In this case, blowers 74 will draw
conditioned air from the passenger cabin and into the
15 interior of battery 22. Battery 22 has a console 34
extending forwardly into the passenger compartment 24.
Console 34 includes power electronics and switching contacts
for managing the distribution of electrical power associated
with battery 22.

20 Figure 5 illustrates a sectional view of battery
22 showing three cell groups 50. Each cell group 50 extends
axially in a direction parallel to the outer wall 14 of gas
storage tank 10. Each cell group 50 comprises a number of
cell stacks 54; in one embodiment each cell group 50
25 includes five cell stacks 54 of roughly D size cells,
yielding a total cell count of 180 cells. In one
embodiment, nickel metal hydride cells have been useful for
producing a battery according to the present invention. The
arrangement of cell groups 50 and cell stacks 54 allows
30 cooling air to be readily drawn into air inlet 58 and out
through air outlets 62. In the event that heating of cell
group 50 is needed due to cool ambient conditions, electric

heater 66 is provided within the interior of battery case 26.

The present invention further includes a method for providing an energy storage system for a vehicle, particularly a hybrid electric vehicle or fuel cell vehicle. According to this method, storage battery 22 is secured within a fuel storage compartment adjacent passenger compartment 24 and immediately adjacent rear seat bulkhead 42 and compressed gas tank 12. The triangular cross section of battery 22 takes particular advantage of the space defined in part by compressed gas storage tank 12, by providing a concave surface 30, a slant surface 38, and a lower surface 28 in contact with floor 46. Taken together, slant surface 38, concave surface 30, and lower surface 28 define a generally triangular cross section of storage battery 22. Nesting of a portion of outer cylindrical wall 14 of gas storage tank 10 with concave surface 30 allows storage battery 22 and gas storage tank 12 to occupy a small volume of the vehicle extending behind rear seat bulkhead 42, so as to permit maximum usage of the interior volume of the vehicle.

Figure 6 shows a portion of the vehicle 10 including vehicle body 76. The vehicle body 76 is a uni-body, although the present invention also contemplates the use of body-on-frame vehicles. Section 7-7 is cut through a portion of the body 76, and is shown in detail in Figure 7. Figure 7 illustrates a fuel cell stack 78, which is a third portion of the energy producing and storage system. The fuel cell stack 78 is placed in a first concavity 80 from outside the vehicle 10. The first concavity 80 is formed within the vehicle body 76, and is configured such that when the fuel cell stack 78 is installed, only a small portion of it extends beyond a bottom portion 82 of the vehicle body

76. The first concavity 80 is also configured to minimize use of vehicle occupant space. One way this is accomplished is by disposing the first concavity 80 directly below a front seat 84 of the vehicle 10.

5 The first concavity 80 has a depth (D1) that can be configured to accommodate particular fuel cell stacks and particular vehicle designs. For example, if a vehicle is being designed from the ground up, appropriate head room may be allowed to increase the depth of a first concavity to
10 receive an entire fuel stack, such that none of the fuel stack extends beyond the vehicle body. Conversely, as shown in Figure 7, a small portion of the fuel cell stack 78 can be allowed to extend beyond the bottom portion 82 of the vehicle body 76, which allows the fuel cell stack 78 to be
15 fitted into an existing vehicle platform, without making adjustments for passenger head room. As illustrated in the drawing figures, the energy producing and storage system is a fuel cell system, which is configured to be efficiently packaged within a vehicle, such as the vehicle 10.

20 As shown in Figure 7, the front seat 84 is attached to two attachment structures, or seat brackets 86, 88. There are actually two pairs of the seat brackets 86, 88 for each of the two front seats in the vehicle 10. Figure 6 shows all four of the seat brackets 86, and all four of the
25 seat brackets 88. As shown in Figure 6, the vehicle body 76 includes two transverse supports 90, 92, each of which runs across the width of the vehicle 10. The transverse supports 90, 92 may be formed integrally with a vehicle body, such as the body 76, or alternatively, may be separate structures
30 attached to an inside portion 94 of the vehicle body 76. In addition to respectively providing the seat brackets 86, 88, the transverse supports 90, 92 also add strength to the vehicle body 76 in the transverse direction. This helps

protect the fuel cell stack 78 in the event of a side impact.

Figure 6 shows a portion 96 of the vehicle body 76 enclosed by a dashed line. The portion 96 is shown in detail from a bottom view in Figure 8. As shown in Figure 5 8, the vehicle 10 includes a pair of longitudinal supports 98, 100, which can be separately attached to, or integrally formed with, the vehicle body 76. The longitudinal supports 98, 100 add strength to the vehicle body 76 in a 10 longitudinal direction, which can help to protect the fuel cell stack 78 in case of a frontal or rear impact. In addition, the longitudinal supports 98, 100 are configured to receive a mounting bracket 102 of the fuel cell stack 78.

As shown in Figure 8, the bracket 102 is a single 15 structure which is disposed around a parameter of the fuel cell stack 78. Of course, the fuel cell stack 78 can be mounted to the longitudinal supports 98, 100, or other portions of the vehicle 10, using any device or devices which are effective to maintain the fuel cell stack in the 20 first concavity 80. In the embodiment shown in Figure 8, the bracket 102 is attached to the longitudinal supports 98, 100 with threaded fasteners 104. This configuration provides the advantage of allowing the fuel cell stack 78 to be easily removed for servicing.

Figure 9 shows an alternative embodiment of the 25 present invention, including a portion of a vehicle body 106. The vehicle body 106 includes a first concavity 108 formed therein. In addition, the vehicle body 106 includes a second concavity 110 which is oriented longitudinally 30 along a length of a vehicle. As shown in Figure 9, the second concavity 110 has a second depth ($D2'$) that is larger than a depth ($D1'$) of the first concavity 108. In this way, the second concavity 110 provides a conduit between front

and rear portions of a vehicle (see Figure 6 illustrating front and rear portions 112, 114 of the vehicle 10). In particular, a fuel cell stack, such as the fuel cell stack 78 can be placed in the first concavity 108 while still allowing room above it in the second concavity 110. This provides a passage for coolant lines, electrical wires, and the like to be conveniently run between the front and rear portions of a vehicle. For example, an electric motor (not shown) could be placed at or near the front of a vehicle, and because of the passage provided by the second concavity 110, the motor could be electrically connected to a battery, such as the battery 22, that is located at or near the rear portion of a vehicle. Thus, the present invention provides compact and efficient storage for a fuel cell system, while still providing the versatility necessary to operate and control a wide variety of vehicle components.

Although the present invention has been described in connection with particular embodiments thereof, it is to be understood that various modifications, alterations, and adaptations may be made by those skilled in the art without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. It is intended that the invention be limited only by the appended claims.